Tradition and Imitation in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The purpose of this paper is to discuss Spenser's use of imitation as a literary device in his allegorical epic poem *The Faerie Queene,* originally published in 1590. The paper begins with a synopsis of Spenser's general intent behind the poem, as well as his use of the theoretical models of literary excellence proposed by his contemporary Sir Phillip Sidney. The paper then follows Spenser's reinterpretation of Ariosto, his treatment of Virgil and Ovid, and chronicles his attempts to parody these imperious influences to create an epic that would give synthesis to the poetic tradition to which he belonged with his religious ethic and fervent nationalism, while paying tribute to his monarch, Elizabeth I.

Edmund Spenser's 1590 epic poem, *The Faerie Queene,* is one of the most ambitious undertakings in the history of epic poetry. The poem, which contains six books and a fragment of a seventh, also stands as one of the longest works of poetry in the English language. Spenser was grounded in contemporary poetic ideology, and sought to prove in practice what Renaissance poets like Sir Philip Sidney had laid out in theory. Central to that theory was the idea that imitation of past traditions was essential to great poetry.

Spenser's ability to imitate multiple authors at once created a plurality of impressions from past traditions in the reader, resulting in a poetic voice which reverberated like a chorus of Classical and Renaissance traditions. This paper will examine Spenser's original intentions behind the poem, and his reasoning for using this technique, before examining in detail these traditions, beginning with Italian Romance, moving on to Virgil, and ending with Ovid. Spenser's language and style will also come under examination, and how they contributed to both his successes and failures with his epic.

Intentional Imitation: Spenser's Grand Design

Spenser stated his purpose in writing *The Faerie Queene* in a letter to his personal friend Sir Walter Raleigh, in which he lays out partially his intentions and designs within the larger work itself. He tells little about the work which is not made obvious within the text itself; however it is worth quoting due to the eloquence with which he makes a summation of his work, and it is a fitting introduction to the text for anyone who is unfamiliar with it. He writes:

> The general end therefore of all this booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued shoulde be most plausible ande pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction. . . In which I haue followed all the antique Poets historicall. . . By ensample of which excellente poets, I labour to pourtraict Arthure, before he was king, the image of a braue knight, perfected in the twelve priuate morall vertues, as Aristotle hauve devised. (Spenser, 1978b, p. 15)

This statement is intended for all prospective readers of the *Faerie Queene,* in the guise of a statement to a friend, as an Elizabethan form of advertising. He sets out his motive for writing a moral allegorical epic in the style of the Classical greats, Virgil and Homer, and also in the style of more recent writers in the Italian tradition, namely Tasso and Ariosto. More detailed explanations of these influences will follow, but momentarily it is most important to discuss Spenser's choice of mode and genre in constructing his great epic, the final phase in the Virgilian model of a poetic career (Rambuss, 2001, p. 24). Central to Spenser's professed purpose is the imitation of past authors within the epic tradition.

As stated above, Spenser's original plan was to have a book for each of the twelve private virtues, of which in 1590, we are given three. Book I tells us the story of Redcrosse, and the virtue of holiness. Book II tells

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the story of Guyon, the knight of temperence, and Book III tells of Britomart, who represents chastity. Each virtue has a distinct role within society; therefore each book of Spenser's epic has a different role within the framework of his own poetry, and a different purpose behind its narrative. The allegory, for the most part, is overtly moral, but it is simultaneously political, due primarily to Spenser borrowing the nationalism of the Virgilian epic.

Spenser deeply believed that it was necessary to construct an English, Christian Epic. The reasoning for this can be found within Sir Philip Sydney's work of literary theory, contemporary to Spenser, *An Apologie for Poetrie.* It is Sydney's desire to prove to Elizabethan society that the art of poetry is not a waste of time. By legitimizing poetry as a true art form, he is also validating the English language's need for a great national epic. Upon closer examination, it will become clear that the choices Spenser makes in regards to genre, mode, and style are informed by Sidney's theories, and by the traditions established by his predecessors.

Sidney, and by association Spenser, believes that the poet is the king of the arts and sciences, due to the fact that not only can the poet show men the way to moral actions, he is able to portray it so expertly that the very power of those words will inspire men to follow the path to righteousness in a way no other vocation is properly equipped (Sidney, 1965). It is already implicit, then, that in order for a poet to fulfill his chosen role within society, there must be an underlying moral truth to be discovered through the poet's voice, with the intent to entice men to aspire toward moral actions through heroic deeds. Spenser's chosen subject, King Arthur, calls him to a tradition long established by Middle Age and Renaissance tales of romance, which ultimately tell heroic tales of King Arthur and the knights of his court engaging in adventurous and chivalric deeds. The recent Italian tradition of epic romance brings forward Spenser's knowledge of Tasso and Ariosto, who no doubt had a great influence on Spenser's use of King Arthur, among other aspects of romance.

Spenser's epic follows the natural tendency of theory to be validated by practical application. If Sidney's aim is to discourse how poetry is the highest art form, meant to teach virtue and inspire men to heroic deeds, then it is Spenser's goal to prove Sidney's proposed maxim asserting poetry's superlative nature. His goal is to provide a concrete example meant to establish English poetry as the new art form of highest moral significance, while simultaneously honoring the Tudor line. To fulfill his purpose, then, Spenser is motivated to take poetry to the greatest height Elizabethan theory will allow him.

The other aspect of this lies in what the Elizabethans considered heroic poetry, synonymous with what Spenser called the historical poet. Virgil, and to a lesser extent, Homer, are his models, but most importantly Virgil establishes the paradigm for the nationalistic epic which gives praise to the rise of a great nation, and creates the impression in the reader that the current monarch, in Spenser's case Elizabeth I, is the culmination of all history, and the fulfillment of a great destiny which can be traced back to the sack of Troy. Relying so heavily on past sources and traditions, the originality of Spenser, who so frequently writes in imitation of his predecessors, has to be addressed, as it is crucial to understanding *The Faerie Queene*'s ultimate purpose.

Imitation was central to the Elizabethan ideal for what makes great poetry, tracing its significance back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and beyond. Sir Philip Sidney holds imitation as the defining aspect of poetic expression, remarking in his *Apology for Poetry,* that, "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation. . . that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture – with this end, to teach and delight" (Sidney, 1965, p. 101). Today, we perceive this as blatant plagiarism, but for the Renaissance poet, imitation was the best way to show both that one belonged within a certain literary tradition, and also that one was a greater craftsman than all who came before.

Spenser and Ariosto: a Posthumous Poetic Contest

Spenser sought to assert his superiority as the greatest epic poet to have lived, not just in England, but throughout the entirety of European literary history. The most recent work Spenser was dealing with was *Orlando Furioso;* thus it follows naturally that his most direct imitation comes from that work. Why Spenser chose *Orlando Furioso,* specifically, as the focus of so many allusions, is subject to scholarly debate. The term "conspicuous irrelevance" has been implemented to describe the numerous allusions made by Spenser to Ariosto's work throughout the *Faerie Queene,* which are, for the most part, irrelevant to their source, and adverse to their original context, while simultaneously Spenser is deliberately perverse in the way he "turns

borrowed matter upside down" (Wiggins, 2011, p. 257-58). Spenser is responding to the influence of a powerful predecessor, perverting the original work within his own text in order to discredit him, and showcase his own superiority and virtuosity.

Orlando Furioso was a blend of allegory, romance, and epic, not unlike the *Faerie Queene,* but with a less serious overall tone, and a much closer tie to medieval romance than historical epic. It is worth noting that an English translation of Ariosto's poem was due to be released barely a year after Spenser's 1590 publication of *The Faerie Queene* ,and consequently, the impending release of such a formidable poem into English could do considerable damage to Spenser's reputation (Wiggins, 2011, p. 261). Spenser sought to undermine this event by showing that he was the greater poet by staging a public contest.

Perhaps the most notable episode of Spenser's parody of Ariosto occurs in Book I, Canto viii, wherein Arthur is engaged in battle with the giant, Orgoglio. The episode involves a mirrored shield, a device which serves the dual purpose of invoking Ariosto, and portraying Spenser as the poet of greater moral seriousness. Spenser's voice itself could win him the title of the premier poet, but his skill lies not only in elegant verse, but also in writing the allegory, through which he develops intricate layers of outside meaning (Meyer, 1991, p. 27). One must work through the extensive allegory, which often requires significant knowledge of past sources, to interpret his true intentions. He writes:

> And in his fall his shield, that couered was,
> Did loose his vele by chaunce, and open flew:
> The light whereof, that heauens light did pas,
> Such blazing brightness through the aier threw,
> That eye mote not the same endure to view. (Spenser, 1978a, I.viii.19)

Most of Spenser's audience would have been familiar with the shield from Ariosto's poem, and the allusion made by Spenser would have invoked a certain response from the reader's familiarity with its role within that text. A key feature of Spenser's style of imitation is his tendency to manipulate the readers' expectations and knowledge of past works, and twisting those expectations around via parody and ironic reversals of roles, symbols, or characters.

He is most successful when the reader is familiar with the texts to which he alludes. His references to *Orlando Furioso* are mostly lost on all but the most studious 21st century reader, but a little investigation will reveal the depth of Spenser's treatment of past works. The following passage offers a succinct summary of the role played by the shield featured in Ariosto's work:

> The old man Atlante is to be understood as time, and Ariosto depicts him astride a winged horse because time flies. The shield, with which he obtains victory over men and women and takes them prisoner, comes, as we recognize, to denote the world, which was created round like a shield. For men and women do indeed remain prisoners in the world, and time is victorious over those who let themselves be seized by the beauties of this lower world. (Wiggins, 2011, p. 265)

Atlante is overcome in the end by a magic ring, with its circular, eternal shape, suggests either God, or a divine essence which can, "Render vain the enchantments of the world (whose apparent beauties are like enchantments) and to rest victorious over time only with the help of God, who alone can aid us against such powerful forces" (Wiggins, 2011, p. 265). Spenser cleverly twists the reader's ideas of the Ariostan shield, which stands as a symbol for man's thralldom to a world of senses, desires, and perceptions which are ultimately false, and only overcome by the power of God.

Arthur's shield assumes the symbolic position of Ariosto's ring, being the physical manifestation of Arthur's greatest virtue, magnificence, which Spenser describes as the "virtue for that (according to Aristotle and the rest) it is the perfection of all the rest, and it contained in it them all" (Spenser, 1978b, p. 16). His shield is that which destroys illusions and frees the spirit with blinding magnificence, a symbol of the sheer power of Christian virtue to blind the wicked and restore truth. The reader educated in Ariosto brings into the reading a knowledge of Atlante's shield, which is a very negative symbol, and redirects it into a powerful symbol of Christian virtue. What Spenser and Sidney considered imitation may more accurately be called mockery in this context.

The episode where Atlante is defeated by a magic ring is also suggested by Spenser's description of the uncovered shield smiting the giant Orgoglio, using one symbol to discredit his predecessor, and prove that he is the poet of higher moral sensitivity. Spenser's use of allusion in this way is deliberate, and in many ways it is a silent tribute to Ariosto's poem, where Spenser asks the reader to remember the great work which is *Orlando Furioso,* but also to keep in mind that *The Faerie Queene* is the better poem within the construct of Elizabethan poetic standards. Given that Ariosto is best known as a writer of romance, Spenser's shield parody also "represents, as a self-reflexive metaphor of Spenserian poetics, Spenser's use of poetry to rescue his readers from infatuation with the facile illusionism of texts like the *Orlando Furioso"* (Wiggins, 2011, p. 267). In other words, Spenser is convinced that the highest truth is to be learned from the historical epic, and not from the less serious romance.

Unfortunately for writers of romance like Ariosto, Spenser, like Sidney, believes in the supremacy of the epic genre. As much as he is attempting to prove he is the greatest English poet, he is also seeking to prove that the epic is the highest poetic form. His attempts to discredit Ariosto are clear enough evidence of that, but the fact that a great English epic had yet to surface was enough to make writers such as Sidney and Spenser nervous. Before *The Faerie Queene* was published, the supremacy of the epic as the great literary art form of the Renaissance was simply a theory in England, the works of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid had to be updated for a new generation, and inevitably, they were successful, thanks to Spenser's labor over *The Faerie Queene.* The Christian ethic behind the epic was the very reason why it was the characteristic literary form of the Renaissance: not only did it advance ideals of moral inspiration, but also did the patriotic duty of advancing a sense of national achievement (Roe, 2000, p. 290).

Escaping the Shadow of Virgil

In Spenser's view, Ariosto had failed in creating a true national identity within his poem, lacking the nationalism characteristic of the Virgilian epic. Naturally, Ariosto used the poem to honor his patron, and the poem was in dedication to the ruling class, but he had failed in creating the breadth of historical scope that Virgil had modeled in the *Aeneid.* Spenser analyzed the, "*Eclogues, Georgics,* and *Aeneid* as symbolic forms in which Virgil progressively developed his myth of Augustus' brave new world" (Neuse, 2011, 610). Spenser applies this idea to his own age, with the belief that the highest aspiration of his epic was to show Elizabeth's Tudor dynasty as the culmination of all history, as an English golden age similar to Virgil's tribute to Augustus. Spenser modeled his entire poetic career after Virgil, first writing pastoral poetry, and proceeding towards the epic at the end of his career, so it is no surprise that so much of Spenser's epic theory involved imitating his ideal historical poet, Virgil. Spenser must have succeeded in this task, after reading excerpts from the poem to Elizabeth I, he was given a yearly stipend of £50 (Rambuss, 2001, p. 31).

Like *The Faerie Queene* itself, Spenser's admiration of Virgil is multifaceted and complex. Building on layers of meaning with its text, Virgil's influence, and as a result, Spenser's imitation of Virgil, is as intricate and deep. Spenser parodies and adapts many episodes from the *Aeneid* to suit his own designs, using Aeneas as a model for many of his own heroes, praising his queen and country in the same fashion as Virgil praised his emperor, and Rome. As it has been remarked, the allusions Spenser makes to Ariosto are mostly arbitrary, but in regards to his poetic master Virgil, *The Faerie Queene* could not exist in its current state without him.

Spenser's idea that each protagonist of *The Faerie Queene* should represent and idealize a different private, Christian virtue, has its genesis within the work of Virgil. Aeneas, the hero displaced from Troy and predestined ancestor of the Roman people, was deliberately portrayed to represent the Stoic ideal, as admired by Virgil and any Romans as the Protestant ideal was dear to Spenser and his fellow Englishmen (Grant, 1980b, p. 466-67). Spenser knew he could one-up Virgil by creating not only one Christian hero, but creating seven (one for each book of *The Faerie Queene,* plus Arthur as the summation of all Christian virtue). Part of Virgil's purpose was to inspire men to follow Aeneas' example of a man who perseveres and endures despite insurmountable obstacles. Virgil accomplishes this by telling a focused tale of heroic actions, while Spenser give a fragmented narrative full of breaks in the action and digressions. For Spenser, it is not the narrative that inspires men to emulate great deeds, but extensive allegory, relying heavily on subtext to power his meaning.

Spenser's imitation of Virgil is extensive, but *The Faerie Queene* is in no way a mere copy or update of the original, like so many uninspired modern remakes of classic films. The mark of great imitation, in Renaissance terms, is one who is a great hider of his art (Webb, 2011, p. 65). It is debated that Spenser's

skill in imitating Virgil lies in the fact that he was not intimately familiar with the text. Although there are echoes of the *Aeneid* throughout *The Faerie Queene*, it is rare that we see Spenser writing with Virgil's text open before him (Webb, 2011, p. 68). More importantly, we do not see Spenser directly copying his original; we are given only connotative signifiers - flickers of meaning which direct our minds back to Virgil. These Virgilian echoes are molded to Spenser's own poetic voice and purpose.

What most abundantly sets him apart from Virgil, and hides his art of imitation, is the extensive allegory present throughout the poem. For every echo of the *Aeneid* present in Spenser's poem, a moral allegory lies just beneath (or on top of), veiling his source with another layer of meaning, which often itself takes on a secondary political significance, further obfuscating what might be seen as blatant imitation of his predecessor. Spenser, in using allegory to this effect, "dispel[s] the illusion that words mean what they say" (Mucci, 2000, p. 298). Since *The Faerie Queene* is the culmination of Spenser's Virgilian poetic development, Virgil is in some way present in every aspect of the poem. He is infused within the allegory, as much within the conceit as he is influencing it from without. The very natures of allegory and imitation insist that when Spenser writes a line, he is pulling meaning from past sources, and also from the reader's catalogue of moral knowledge, to create something wholly new, multidimensional, and uniquely Spenserian.

Often Spenser directly parodies scenes from Virgil, ironically reversing roles or situations, lacing them with an allegorical undertone. One episode specifically involves Aeneas meeting his mother Venus in a woodland setting, disguised as Diana, chaste goddess of the woodland. Already Spenser is creating a multiplicity of different meanings in the eye of the reader through what is known about characters from the *Aeneid*. The heroic character of Aeneas and the chastity of Diana are immediately contrasted by Spenser's characters, Braggadochio and Belphoebe. Braggadochio is an ironic reversal of Aeneas' character; as a false, empty boaster, he appears deflated when juxtaposed with the steadfast heroism of Aeneas. Invoking an image of Diana is intended to direct our minds towards another chaste woman important in Spenser's life - The Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I.

Before the scene is even laid out, the imitation of the scene from Virgil recalls the aforementioned preconceived ideas to the forefront of the reader's mind. Spenser's writing is such that no layer of meaning can be understood in isolation – the key to this is the way he uses imitation to create meaning without having to fully explicate it within the text. This, no doubt, is why Renaissance poets so highly regarded the technique.

The parody shows the consequences inherent in facing heroic situations with a false heart and a weak mind. Spenser uses the digression to show how lack of virtue fails us when faced with a situation which requires strength of character. Despite the moral undertone, he also wants us to be aware that he is invoking the Virgilian tradition in the middle of the action, breaking the continuity of the story merely for the sake of displaying his own erudition. Aeneas, when he is in the presence of a Goddess, stands strong and heroic, much as it is implied Sir Guyon, the hero of this book, would when faced with the same situation. His foil, Braggadochio, however, does just the opposite:

> Eft through the thicke they heard one rudely rush;
> With noyse whereof he from his loftie steed
> Downe fell to the ground, and crept into a bush,
> To hide his coward head from dying dreed. (Spenser, 1978a, II.iii.21)

It is also important to note that his lofty steed is Guyon's horse, stolen from the book's hero, and that he is frightened even before the Diana-like Belphoebe reveals herself. Spenser then spends ten full stanzas describing Belphoebe, conjuring up images of Diana, and by association, giving praise to Elizabeth I by comparing her to an antique Roman deity – a personification of the grandeur of antiquity. Spenser manages to weave these images, themes, and allusions together at once, creating the sensation in the reader that antiquity and Renaissance, Queen and Goddess, heroic deeds and Christian virtue are all one image, bringing past and present together in harmony. Imitation is the key to creating these layers of meaning – the complex moral allegory would fall flat without it, taking on the two-dimensionality of medieval allegorical plays like *Everyman*.

While he is imitating a scene from Virgil, in no way can his narrative voice be considered Virgilian. The *Aeneid* is a very centered narrative, following Aeneas from his flight from Troy as he struggles to fulfill his destiny. Virgil's narrative structure is in no way linear, but it is very centered upon its protagonist. Even

from book to book of Spenser's epic, it is full of digressions and side plots which do very little to advance the narrative, other than to show some sort of contrast to the rest of the story, or quite frequently to show what virtue is by displaying what virtue is not. Other times Spenser is simply creating an excuse to insert another episode of classical imitation, which seems to be the chief purpose of the episode with Bragaddochio.

Ironically, while Spenser is intent to prove his superiority to Ariosto, his narrative style has much more in common with the fragmented disunity of romance than it has with the unified text of the *Aeneid*. Ariosto, as the foremost author of romance in the sixteenth century, gives Spenser the model for this, but on the surface, Spenser seems to be attempting a dual purpose which seems overtly counterproductive (Wiggins, 2011, p. 271). Spenser's imitation of the romance genre poses a serious problem in regards to his overall purpose – he imitates romance conventions when it is his intent to discredit the genre as inferior to the epic.

Spenser is well aware of past traditions and his own limitations in participating with those traditional forms. Improving Virgil's narrative structure is a futile task – he is not interested in staging any public contest with his great master Virgil, he is so remote that it would not in any way advance Spenser's aspiration to be the greatest Renaissance poet. Imitating Virgil's narrative structure would do nothing other than produce a cookie cutter version of *The Aeneid* with a moral twist. Romance was the greatest threat to the supremacy of the epic during the Renaissance, so it is no surprise that Spenser would imitate certain conventions of the "inferior" romance, augmented with classical imitation and parody, to prove that his version of romantic narrative was both intellectually and morally superior to that of the established form. In the world of Elizabethan England, we can see the cultural cues which indicate that reading romances was widely regarded to be a morally dangerous pastime (Moore, 2000, p. 319). Spenser believed he could take romance conventions and use them to create a higher literature, with a didactic, Christian ethic.

The renewal of past tradition within the epic genre holds great importance to all writers of epics, which of course includes Spenser. Neuse (2011) writes, "Every genuine epic represents a renewal of tradition. . . The epic poet absorbs the tradition, as Virgil himself had done, and gives it new life and meaning in the light of his own individual talent and inclination" (p. 618). By practicing the art of imitation, Spenser is asserting his place within that tradition, but he is not diverging from safe creative territory, nor is he blazing a trail for other poets to recklessly follow. He is a poet with a great sense of establishment, but not an altogether inventive one. His gift for synthesis, however, is difficult to ignore, and it is what binds the many layers of his art together.

Aside from the scenes from Virgil Spenser sneaks in to the narrative, Spenser takes from Virgil a sense of nationalism and history key to the Renaissance ideal of the epic poet. Spenser's goal was to do in his own time and in his own unique way what Virgil had done in his, and in this fashion, Spenser used imitation to craft an original poem" (Webb, 2011, p. 68). Creating a national identity within the poem is what Virgil had accomplished in Augustan Rome, so Spenser aspired to create a poem that was uniquely Elizabethan, in tribute to the reigning Tudor dynasty and his beloved Mother England.

Spenser includes two passages of chronicle history in his epic, a trick learned from Virgil and also imitated by the Italians Tasso and Ariosto, taking Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* as his primary source, among others (Roche, 1978, 1129). They trace the history of Britain from Brute, the grandson of Aeneas, to Elizabeth I, with Merlin in Book III prophesying the ascension of the Tudor Dynasty. Spenser's use of the chronicle history is much more developed than those writing in the Italian tradition. Professor Greenlaw writes:

> "His praise of the Tudor House. . . was the expression of a philosophy of history, of a conception of a British destiny. He did not invent it, but found it ready to his hand in a score of places. He glorified it, so that it became part of a structure itself of the greatest work of the imagination produced during the Elizabethan period." (as cited in Webb, 2011, p. 72)

Spenser's possession of a philosophy of history truly aligns him with Virgil, in that he is not merely imitating a section of Virgil's poem, but is instilling the spirit of Virgil's historical purpose into *The Faerie Queene*. Virgil, too, possessed a philosophy of history, and perceived his nation's history as containing a spiritual significance (Webb, 2011, p. 73). Elizabethan England, like Virgil's Rome, was finally gaining a sense of its own national history such that one could finally take pride in being English, in a way that had not existed before. Spenser's aim was to create a poem reflecting that national pride which would be a source of patriotic admiration standing for generations to come, as Virgil's poem had.

In the *Aeneid,* Virgil makes the prophesy of the nation's history the crowning moment in the preparation of the hero (Webb, 2011, p.73). This is what truly sets Spenser apart from his Italian contemporaries in imitating Virgilian chronicle history. In *The Faerie Queene,* Spenser instills the privilege of receiving the nation's history on three characters, two of whom are Arthur and Britomart. Arthur's significance, and place within the British chronicle history, requires little explication. Britomart, however, must be explained within the internal context of Spenser's epic, and also the external framing of Elizabethan politics.

Britomart is the heroine of Book III, the shining example of chastity. It is predestined that Britomart marry the knight Artegall, as Merlin informs her, with their union beginning the line of succession which comes to full fruition with the Tudor Queen Elizabeth. Allegorically speaking, Britomart's chastity also creates in her the symbol of Elizabeth herself, such that in a way, Elizabeth is both the beginning and the end of the Tudor dynasty. The effect of hearing her destiny is life-changing for the "languishing damsel," who, "becomes a doughty and invincible lady-knight. Here a knowledge of British history has actually created a 'hero'" (Webb, 2011, p. 77).

Yet there is more to the prophesy given to Britomart by Merlin. His final words echo with uncertainty:

> Then shall a royal virgin rain, which shall
> Stretch her white rod our the Belgicke shore,
> And the great Castle smite so sore with all,
> That it shall make him shake, and shortly learn to fall.
> But yet the end is not. There *Merlin* stayed,
> As overcome of the spirits power. (Spenser, 1978a, III.iii.49-50)

This uncertainty echoes Virgil's implied anxiety about the future of Rome after the death of Augustus at the end of *Aeneid* VI, which coincides with Spenser's own worries about the future of England under a virgin queen, whose succession was never settled during Spenser's lifetime, and ultimately resulted in the ascension of the Stuart Dynasty after Elizabeth's death (Burrow, 2001, p. 223). His rereading of Virgilian prophesy resulted in an "attempt to make a dynastic epic for an unmarried, childless queen . . . bound to produce stress between the idealizing world of the poem and its political reality" (p. 223).

Arthur's reaction to his own version of the chronicle history reveals Spenser's fervent nationalism and reverence for the history of his country:

> At last quite rauisht with delight, to hear
> The royal offspring of his native land,
> Cryde out, Deare country, o how dearly deare
> Ought thy remembrance. . .
> How brutish is it not to understand,
> How much to her we owe, that all vs gaue,
> That gaue vnto vs all, what euer good we haue. (Spenser, 1978a, II.x.69)

Spenser the Ancient and the Failures of Archaic Language

Spenser intended to create a new national identity for a modern age in England during the Renaissance. His choice of language seems averse to this purpose, however, riddled with deliberately archaic, half-invented language which does little to invoke the atmosphere of modernity, and instead takes the reader back to more traditional times. Ben Jonson famously remarked that, "Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language" (as cited in Maley, 2001, p. 163). He is invoking antiquity with a rich and traditional style of language in an attempt to create something that is not necessarily the model of modern English, but instead weaves an illusion of the breadth and scope of the entire history of the English people through a linguistic medium - his imitation of archaic English language.

Homer is perhaps the best known example of this in the epic tradition. His "rich, traditional language . . . is capable of rising to every emotion and mood and occasion" (Grant, 1980a, p. 212). It is Spenser's hope that he can accomplish the same with his traditional language, but his imitation is actually limited by his own invention. With his imitation of Virgil and Ariosto, he takes the basis of imitation, and from it, creates something grandiose. Maley (2001) noted that, "Spenser's style was cramped by his approach to poetic diction, his desire to enhance poetic language, the limitations of theme and the constraints of his chosen

verse form" (p. 162). Spenser's strict choice of rhyme and verse form limits his poetry, and by association, limits the effectiveness of his Homeric imitation.

Spenser wants to be both modern and ancient, but the legacy left behind him has proven that despite his efforts, he could not have it both ways. Jonson, who wrote in the age following Spenser's death, where his influence would have been at its most fresh, regarded him not as a contemporary who was advancing poetic technique and thought, but as an ancient who is to be honored (Alpers, 2001, 255). Thus in the early 17th century, Spenser had already assumed the status of the revered ancient poet, with the company of those such as Chaucer, rather than Marlowe of Shakespeare. Imitation was an important aspect of Spenser's poetic theory, but in his attempt to prove he was superior to his poetic ancestors, he also aligned himself more closely with them textually. His reliance on imitation and allusion created a work with too little to offer in the way of original characters and situations, relying on long-established forms and archetypal circumstances for his matter, of which his indebtedness to past traditions made him a part of England's literary past, instead of a contributing member of England's literary future.

His emphasis on the importance of Protestant morality to poetic technique, however, did not quickly fade. His heir to the English epic tradition, John Milton, would follow parts of Spenser's model to create the ultimate English epic, following in part Virgil's example, but doing a much better job of veiling his imitative tendencies and creating something wholly new out of them. By examining which aspects of Spenser were desirable to imitate by his successors, we can see visibly which components of Spenser's imitation of the ancients succeeded and failed. Milton imitated Spenser in two important ways – by following Spenser's moral example, and rejecting Spenser's restrictive language and form.

Milton lays this out in the preface to *Paradise Lost*:

> The measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; rhyme being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter; graced indeed since by the use of some famous modern poets, carried away by custom. (Milton, 1999, p. 1817)

Spenser carried away from Homer and Virgil a plethora of historical and heroic matter, and a sensitivity to traditional language. One aspect of imitation that is lacking from Spenser in regards to the classical epics, implied by Milton, is the unrhymed form which gives the epic the freedom it requires to adequately describe and dictate its lofty and serious subject matter. If Milton is correct, then it follows to say that Spenser should have been taking notes from the less "serious" scene of Elizabethan drama, the chief source of the English "heroic" verse - iambic pentameter - in the late 16th century. Spenser would no doubt have been more successful had he been inspired by the heroic verses of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and *Dr. Faustus*, and realized, like Milton did, that unrhymed iambic pentameter was the true modernization of the metric forms utilized so successfully by Homer and Virgil.

When juxtaposed with Milton, Spenser is easily seen as a great imitator, but a much less successful pioneer. When it came to Protestant morals and Christian virtues embodied in poetry, Spenser was the great inventor, although he was simply imitating and updating for a Christian audience Virgil's Aeneas as the Stoic ideal, and Homer's explication of the Homeric code of honor through his heroes (Grant, 1980a, p. 210). This is perhaps his most successful application of imitation, fulfilling Sir Philip Sidney's ideal that poetry should uphold virtuous ideals and inspire men to perform honorable deeds. Milton praises Spenser's didactic prowess in his political prose work, *Areopagitica,* declaring him "Our sage and serious poet . . . whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas" (as cited in Silberman, 1988, p. 23). Milton's voice carries more authority than perhaps any other in English literary history, such that, ultimately, he is declaring Spenser's success in proving that he surpassed Ariosto and Tasso in moral seriousness, and in fashioning a "gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline."

A New Mythology and the Pluralization of Poetic Voice

There is still one more aspect of Spenser's fascination with antiquity and artistic imitation, namely, the rampant references to Greek and Roman mythology which permeate the text of *The Faerie Queene.* Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a very important work for Spenser, whose poetry in the *Faerie Queene* has been praised as an "Endless gallery of mythological paintings" (Hamilton, 1959, p. 335). In III.xi, Spenser references Ovid sixteen times, mostly within mythological scenes depicted upon a great tapestry, which is itself imitated

from Ovid's description of Arachne's tapestry, woven during her contest with Minerva (Roche, 1978, p. 1161-62). As in Ovid's tale, the tapestry depicts scenes of jealous and lusty love enacted by the Gods, which in Spenser's tale is set against the backdrop or Britomart and Belphoebe's allegory of chastity penned in tribute to the Virgin Queen. Despite the contrasting moral undertone, during scenes such as this where Spenser invokes the spirit of Ovid, he abandons his serious, moral voice, and speaks with the eloquence of a poet with a deep and sublime visual sense:

> For round about, the wals yclothed were
> With goodly arras of great maiesty,
> Wouen with gold and silke so close and nere,
> That the rich metal lurked priuily,
> As faining to be hid from enuious eye;
> Yet here, and there, and every where unawares
> It showed it self, and shone unwillingly;
> Like a discolored Snake, whose hidden snares
> Through the greene gras his long bright burnish back declares. (Spenser, 1978a, III.xi.28)

Thereafter he describes the many scenes of love between Gods and mortals, with erotic verse one would not at first expect from Spenser. In these scenes he abandons the high, historical tone of Virgil and becomes the sensitive Ovidian poet – his ability to weave these tones together within the allegorical framework of the poem shows his poetic versatility, and his skill in conquering the intricate arabesque which formed when one attempts to imitate poets of such differing, antithetical poetic techniques.

It is often overlooked in Spenserian criticism to give the poet credit for attempting not only to become the English Virgil, but also the English Ovid and English Ariosto simultaneously, and beneath the stiff moral allegory lies a poet with a multifaceted voice capable of arising to any occasion necessary. As the Virgilian poet, he praises his muse:

> Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske
> As time her taught in lowly Shepheards weeds,
> Am now enforst a far unfitter taske. . .
> To blazon broad amongst her learned throng:
> Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song. (Spenser, 1978a, proem I.1)

His Ovidian voice abandons the heroic scope for the aesthetically pleasing, which becomes a very crucial narrative device for Spenser, as his readers likely need a break from the heroic themes and moral allegory for scenes which please the sensual imagination and delight the ear. When placed side by side, the styles appear to clash with each other, but within the flow of his epic, the styles meld seamlessly into one unified vision, which seems to be largely overlooked by Spenser's contemporaries. Spenser, in effectively entwining a rich tradition of differing poetic styles with a plurality of layered meaning, it becomes difficult to separate any specific use of theme, style, or mode, without placing it in the context of the rest of the tapestry he weaves in writing *The Faerie Queene.*

Conclusion

Spenser is effectively created a complex system of interpretation and meaning within his epic, where the dreamlike realm of Faerie Lond, projects a reality of its own. It is a product of the poet's imagination, only inhibited by the verse form he has chosen, where the grand epic is seen side by side with sensual scenes taken from a deep well of mythology and Biblical lore. Focusing too much on Spenser's intention regarding the allegory which encapsulates the epic largely limits the complexity and scope of the poem. The key feature of Spenser's technique lies within the unique way in which Elizabethan poets regarded tradition and imitation of key figures within that framework. *The Faerie Queene* does much more than copy its originals, Spenser takes his borrowed matter and makes it his own, weaving each thread of allusion into a much larger framework, where it cannot be isolated or understood without reference to its context within the poem, and within the literary world of the late 16th century. By combining so many elements and styles, he creates something that cannot be described as purely Virgilian, Homeric, or Ovidian, but uniquely Spenserian, a plural voice intertwined with his own ambitions and experiences.

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